Envisioning trust: trust, metaphors, and situations

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A large and rapidly growing trust-literature attests to the importance of trust in relationships and organizations. Trust is a precondition for effective leadership, for well-functioning groups and for organizational integration and commitment. As a result, a large literature has sought to describe the relationship between trust and social outcomes as well as show how trust forms, develops or in some cases breaks down(Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Burke et al. 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; 2002).

Trust has been defined in different ways, as a belief, an attitude, as intent or as a choice (Kramer, 1999). An often used definition sees trust as "..a psychological state comprising the

intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another. (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998: 395).

Trust means different things to people in different situations. The trust or distrust a potential buyer experiences towards a vendor at a sales-outlet in a foreign country differ in significant ways from the trust a coach or teacher experiences towards a team-member or student, are associated with different expectations toward a trustee and the situation, and suggest different approaches to developing trust as well as responses to breaches of trust. Different understandings manifest themselves in proverbs and citations such as "The only way to make a man trustworthy is to trust him" (Henry Lewis Stimson) or "trust but verify" (Russian proverb).

Existing contributions on trust however largely ignore people's own understanding of trust – instead, trust is assumed to exist, independently of the trustor's own understanding of trust. Seminal models like that of Mayer et al. (1995) build on a traditional input-throughput-output model of information processing exemplifying what Bandura refers to as mechanical agency in which "external influences operate mechanistically on action, but it does not itself have any motivative, self-reflective , self-reactive, creative or self-directive properties" (Bandura, 1989:1175). The self-system here becomes merely repository for environmental forces (experience). New contributions have introduced new mechanisms (e.g. categorization as a replacement for actual experience) but retained the input-throughput-output –theorizing.

As a result, existing theories of trust fail at describing significant variation with respect to trust, variation relating to the various ways people construe and explain their trust in other people. Not only does the existing research literature fail to account for variation but the literature also intercepts itself from valuable insights about the underlying causal mechanisms

that shape trust and relationships. This is particularly noticeable with respect to our understanding of the performative aspects of trust – how people shape and transform social contexts through displays of trust (Szerszynski, 1999).

Here we argue that the experience and effects of trust are influenced by how people construe trust in specific situations – people are not merely passive receptacles of information but bring their own understanding of trust to social situations (Bandura, 1989). Drawing on the literature on conceptual metaphors we describe these as three trust-metaphors. These trust-metaphors we suggest have important ramifications for how people experience trust, how people go about developing trust and peoples' reactions to trust or changes in trust (trust-breaches). Different trust-metaphors mediate the link between situational contingencies and demands on the one hand and peoples' strategies for managing different social situations. Thus different metaphors here can be seen as corresponding to different «strategies» of managing different types of interdependence in different types of situations.

Conceptual metaphors

Metaphor involves understanding and experiencing one thing in light of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). A conceptual metaphor can be defined as «mapping of associative links between corresponding elements of dissimilar concepts» (Landau et al. 2010: 1052).

Metaphors importantly are not merely linguistic phenomena but a fundamental feature of the way our cognitive system works. People think in metaphors (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Lakoff, 1987). Conceptual metaphors then may or may not have linguistic equivalents. One of the most prevalent and important metaphor, the box-metaphor in which elements are seen as belonging either to one category or the other, has no

corresponding name, yet has a profound influences on how people think and reason (Lakoff, 1987).

The effects of metaphors on social information processing have been demonstrated through a series of experiments using the metaphoric transfer strategy which assesses whether manipulating psychological states (e.g. perceptions or motivations) related to one concept influences the way people process information related to a dissimilar concepts in a way that correspond to their metaphoric relationship (Landau, Meier & Keefer, 2010: 1047). Often used metaphors in these studies include metaphors using the source concept of verticality for positive and negative moods, or spatial distance for time. Metaphors thus have been found to influence attention and memory processes (Robinson, Zabelina, Ode & Moeller, 2008), how we perceive other people (Schubert, 2005), the perception of social symbols and environments (Meier, Sellbom & Wygant, 2007) as well as attitudes (Meier & Robinson, 2004).

Understanding argue Lakoff & Johnson (2003) takes place within domains of experience based on experiential gestalts that are experientially basic. Such basic experiences typically involve our bodies and the interaction between our bodies with the natural environment or with other people. Such experiences moreover because they reflect common human experiences (we all have similar bodies) will be recurrent in all cultures. Examples include the experienced relationship between health and an upright position which leads to the metaphorical association between good and up. People grasp increasingly abstract constructs and phenomena through the means of metaphors grounded in a more immediate and tangible experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, 1999). The term scaffolding is used to describe the processes through which metaphoric connections develop from early experiences with non-metaphoric associations between social experiences and physical interactions (Williams, Huang & Bargh, 2009; Bargh, 2006).

Metaphors are generative and inferential – they frame problems and suggest some solutions while masking others. To say that a debate is a war implies transferring our knowledge of war (e.g. war is about winning and inflicting wounds on the opponent) to the domain of a debate. In so doing metaphor influences how something (a debate) is structured, understood and as a consequence talked about. To talk about a debate as a war thus highlights the combative, tactical aspects of a debate. At the same time metaphors also hide other possible aspects of a phenomenon, aspects that may be highlighted through alternative metaphors. Thus viewing a debate as a dance highlights the cooperative aspects of a debate and suggests other goals (cooperating to bring forth a new and enriched understanding of the debate-topic) (Lakoff, 1987; Schön, 1993). Metaphors (like intelligence is a fixed entity) thus form the foundation of implicit theories that enable people to explain and form expectations about past and future outcomes (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, Knee, Patrick & Lonsbary, 2003). As a result metaphors also influence peoples' motivation to pursue different actions, tactics or strategies (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Knee et al. 2003; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin & Wan, 1999).

Three metaphors for trust

Here we focus on three conceptual metaphors for trust. These represent very different ways of thinking about trust with very different implications as with respect how people go about developing trust, how they respond to breaches of trust or interpret and experience trust. The conceptual metaphors as of today have no name or are rarely or ever explicitly formulated. They do however influence the way people think about trust and are at times reflected in formal theories of trust.

The first conceptual metaphor we refer to as "trust as a decision". Here trust is essentially seen as a reflection of properties of the benefactor of trust, the trustee. Developing trust here

involves the task of unpacking the true and assumed unchanging identity of the trustee as either trustworthy or not. Trust here is often seen as developing over time «largely as a function of the parties having a history of interaction that allows them to develop a generalized expectancy that the other's behavior is predictable and that he or she will act trustworthy' (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996: 121).

The second conceptual metaphor we refer to as "trust as a performance". Here trust constitutes a capacity of the trustor as opposed to a property of the trustee or the benefactor of trust. The performance metaphor sees trust as a chore that involves effort and perseverance. Unlike the former case in which trust is seen as reflective of a hidden property of the trustee, here trust can be seen as a property of a process that the trustor initiates and supports.

The third conceptual metaphor sees «trust as an uncontrollable force». Here a trustor has little or no control or insight into why he or she trusts someone. This third metaphor finds expression in expressions like I cannot help but trust him "you just have to trust her". Trust here is attributed to psychological processes that are only partially open for introspection, a force to be reckoned with or for which trustors will need to make precautions but that otherwise leaves the trustor with little choice or opportunity for agency. This can be likened to similar metaphors which see creativity as a divine revelation that cannot be forced.

The metaphors suggest different explanations for trust: Drawing on Weiner's attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion (1995), the different trust-metaphors and their accompanying explanations for trust cam be seen as varying with respect to two dimensions; locus or the trustors' perception of what drives the formation and development of trust and control or how much control the trustor sees herself as exercising over the formation and development of trust.

In the “trust as decision metaphor” – the locus of trust is in the trustee – trust reflects an underlying characteristic of the trustee. In the “trust as performance”-metaphor the locus of trust lies in the trustor – trust reflects a decision or effort on the part of the trustor. Finally in the “trust as an uncontrollable force”-metaphor, the locus of trust resides outside the trustor and the trustee. The “trust as a decision”-metaphor leaves the trustor with low to moderate control; the trustor can protect herself against untrustworthy individuals but not alter the underlying disposition of the trustee. In contrast the “trust as a performance”-metaphor suggests considerable control on behalf of the trustor in that a trustor is assumed to influence the trustworthiness of the trustee. Finally the “trust as an uncontrollable force”-metaphor leaves the trustor with the least control in that a trustor is assumed unable to control the experience of trust. Different combinations of locus and control should produce distinct sets of emotions. Hence, an internal locus (trustor) combined with high control (“trust as performance”) should be associated with pride or self-esteem (for positive outcomes) or alternatively shame (when trust is breached or falters). An external locus (focusing on the trustee) when combined with controllability (“trust as decision”) should be associated with gratitude or alternatively anger (Weiner, 1995). The “trust as an uncontrollable force” with the locus residing neither in the trustor nor the trustee and low control should be associated with non-specific emotions (contentment or anxiety).

Finally, different metaphors suggest different implications for how people go about developing trust or respond to breaches of trust. A “trust as a decision” metaphor suggests that trust forms on the basis of verifiable knowledge – suggesting a distanced measured approach to relationships. A breach of trust here is likely to be fatal as it reflects a fatal flaw in the trustee that is not easily repaired. The “trust as performance” metaphor on the other hand emphasizes the involvement of the trustor in making trust happen. Breaches here are not fatal but mendable. Finally the “trust as an uncontrollable force”-metaphor suggest a passive yet

accepting approach in which people accept their experience of trust in the situation yet do little to influence the development of trust.

Situations, metaphors and trust

In order to fully capitalize on the insight that people have different understandings of trust or employ different metaphors for trust, we also need to understand where and when different metaphors and trust-types come to the fore. What do different metaphors really signify and how do they relate to social situations and contexts? Here we suggest that different metaphors can be seen as adaptations to different social situations with different structural properties. These metaphors with their corresponding cognitions and emotions reflect and address the specific opportunities and challenges inherent in that situation (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Different trust-metaphors thus can be seen as adaptive in that they prepare and facilitate adequate responses and reactions in a specific situation. Thus a «trust as performance» metaphor prepare people to shape and in some cases transform where needed and possible, a «trust as decision» metaphor suggests prudence and care in situations where a trustor is likely to have little influence and where misplaced trust can have a large negative downside. A «trust as an uncontrollable force» metaphor likewise can be adaptive in situations where people have little or no control or information and need to align themselves to that situation.

Situations have structural properties that can be divided into two main categories of situational features that we suggest influence the activation of different trust-metaphors: The first is value; to what extent do people see a potential for a constructive relationship with the trustee? This is likely to reflect the perceived value of outcomes that can be accessed through the relationship – some relationships are more attractive than others because other people possess attributes or resources that we cannot easily obtain elsewhere.

The second category of situational features, are features that influences a trustor expectation that she can actually influence the views and motivations of a trustee and the situation (transforming a competitive situation into a more collaborative situation). Situations that involve some area of common interests, that extends over time, provide the trustor with ample information and that allows free communication between the partners thus suggest a greater potential for influencing a trustee and a relationship than situations that involve little common ground, are one-off encounters, provide the trustor with little or no information and provide little room for communication.

Situations in which relationships are seen as potentially valuable and in which the partners see themselves as capable of influencing the other we suggest should be associated with the activation of a «trust as performance» metaphor. Situations in which relationships are seen as less valuable and/ or are seen as offering less room for influence then should be associated with the activation of a «trust as decision» metaphor leaving the trustor with little other options than simply observing and learning about a trustee as opposed to influencing.

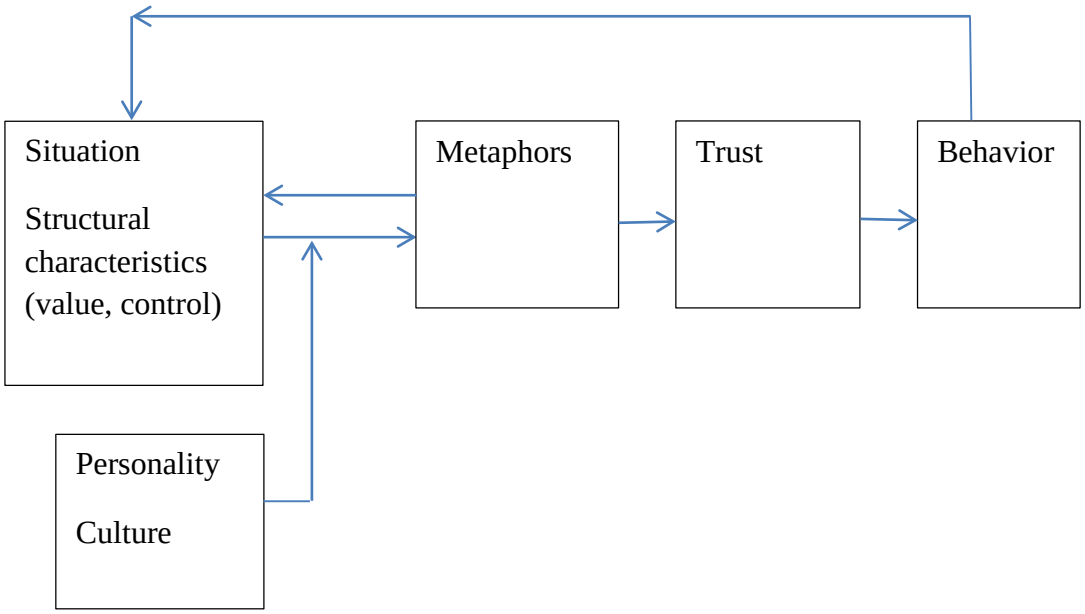
The effect of the situation on the activation of different metaphors moreover is likely to be moderated by personality traits and culture.

Thus situations moderated by personality and culture influence the activation of trust-metaphors that in turn influence peoples' responses, strategies and experience of trust. The relationship between situations and metaphors however is not one-directional. Metaphors also influence peoples' construal of social situations. Thus "the trust as performance"- metaphor once activated is likely to influence how people see the trustee and social situations, increasing the salience of metaphor-consistent situational features over non-consistent features (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991). Finally, different metaphors we suggest guide behavior that shape and align situations to the activated metaphor. A «trust as decision»-

metaphor emphasizing distance and objectivity is likely to produce behavior that helps reproduce inter-personal distance.

The model is shown below:

Figure 1: Trust, metaphors and situations – a tentative model



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